

George Halas: Father of American Professional Football

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George Halas witnessed the American Dream and it entertained thousands of sports fans throughout the country. Before 1920, football was considered a secondary sport by most sports fans. It was overshadowed by the big three sports of that day; boxing, horseracing, and baseball. Professional football had potential but it needed a leader. On September 17, 1920, Halas would lead a small group of enthusiastic investors and become the father of modern day professional football.

Halas was quite an athlete himself. He graduated from the University of Illinois in 1918, where he starred in football and baseball. He played for the New York Yankees in 1919 but, because of injury, he retired. He then moved back to Illinois. While working as a recreational director for the Staley starch works, he formed the Decatur Staleys. a semiprofessional football team. The Staleys won 13 and lost 1 game with Halas as a coach and player in 1920. On September 17 of that same year, Halas attended a monumental meeting in Canton, Ohio. There, sitting on running boards of cars in an automobile agency, the American professional football association (APFA) was formed. Four teams joined the league that year: Canton bulldogs, Akron Pros, Buffalo All-Americans, and the Decatur Staleys. The Decatur Staleys moved to Chicago in 1921 and became the Chicago Bears when Staley did not renew the franchise. Some say they were named the Bears because that was an appropriate name since they played in the same sports facility as the Chicago Cubs baseball team. Halas and his partner Edward Dutch Sternaman took over operation of the ball club. At the annual league meeting of 1922, other owners agreed to Halas' proposal that the APFA should also be given a new name, the National Football League.

By signing all-American running back Red Grange from Illinois, Halas helped save professional football from extinction. Grange was known as the “Gallop Ghost” and the “Wheaton Iceman”. Once Grange turned professional and went on the road with the Chicago Bears he played before packed stadiums wherever he went. In New York in December, 1925, he drew a record 72,000 people to a pro game. Grange then went on a barnstorming tour with 8 games in 12 days. Grange became a national celebrity, endorsing dolls, sweaters caps, ginger ale, candy bars and even meat loaf. He was, according to announcer Grantland Rice, “three or four men and a horse rolled into one for football purposes.” With the help of Red Grange’s popularity, the threat of football leaving was gone forever.

Halas created much of what is in the NFL today. Halas's commitment to the T-formation also helped from the popularity of today's wide-open football offenses by adding a man-in-motion. The bears used this offense to win championships in 1940 and 1942. The 1940 championship was played against the Washington Redskins. To this day, it is still the biggest victory in league history. 73-0. Halas played and coached the Bears off and on from 1929 until 1968. In forty years, Halas won seven league championships and he was voted coach of the year in 1963 and 1965. He held the record for wins until 1993. In 1963, he was elected as a charter member of the professional football hall of fame in Canton, Ohio. Halas's success as a coach was not directly connected to his strategy but his personality on and off the field. He expected nothing less than perfection from his players and his players gave him their best.

The NFL today owes much to George Halas. Halas was present at all the five early major milestones for the league. He was there at Canton, Ohio when the league was started. He was at the barnstorming tour of Red Grange that popularized the sport. He was influential in all the major rule changes with the T-formation. He helped get football televised. He was present at the

NFL and AFL merger. With all of these in mind, there is no one else that could be considered the father of modern day pro football than George Halas. [From “George Halas,” www.NFL.com (Jan. 26, 2004); “Red Grange,” www.infoplease.com/ipsa/AO (Jan. 15, 2004); “Red Grange” www.sportstrivia.net/redgrange.html109233.html (Nov. 23, 2003); “Red Grange,” www.collegefootballnews.com/Top_100_Players/Top_100_Players_1_Red_Grange.htm (Oct. 31, 2003); “George Halas,” www.infoplease.com/ipsa/A0109252.html (Dec. 15, 2003); “George Halas,” www.baseballlibrary.com/baseballlibrary/ballplayers/H/Halas_George.stm (Dec. 12, 2003); “George Halas,” www.factmonster.com/cgi-bin/id/A0109252.html (Dec. 10, 2003).]